



Op-Ed: Doubts on China's "New Model for Great Power Relationship"

October 3, 2013 | Dr. David Lai

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A buzz phrase, “China’s new model for great power relationship (read U.S.-China relationship),” is making rounds in China’s diplomatic, defense, and policy analysis circles of late. Chinese official statements, policy think-tank discussions, and publications on U.S.-China relations are all heavily loaded with this topic. This fanfare culminated in a statement by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama at the Sunnylands Retreat in southern California in early June 2013. The Chinese initiative also got a “military dressing” 2 months later when Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan took the podium at the Pentagon to advocate a new military relationship between China and the United States.

Old-Wine in a New-Bottle.

The precise wording of Xi Jinping’s remarks at the Sunnylands was not seen anywhere in U.S. official press releases. Yet the Chinese media was flooded with extensive coverage. China’s new foreign policy helmsman, Yang Jiechi, who is currently China’s State Counselor on Foreign Affairs and formerly Chinese Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the United States, provided a Chinese account on Xi’s talking points. Yang accompanied the Chinese president to the meetings at the Sunnylands. He summarized Xi’s assertions as follows. First, China is aware of the power transition with the United States—as a result of China’s rapid rise—and the deadly contests sparked by similar power transitions in ancient as well as contemporary times. However, Xi argues that history is not destiny; nor is war inevitable between China and the United States.

Second, Xi remains hopeful that alternatives to war are possible. China’s pledge of peaceful

development is a prime example. This undertaking came about in 2003 when China attempted to counter the “China Threat” outcry and ease U.S. concerns over China’s rise. The pledge of peaceful development categorically stated that China would not do the following: 1) challenge U.S. supremacy in international affairs; 2) make efforts to alter the U.S.-led international order; 3) use force to secure natural resources for China’s development; and, 4) repeat the mistakes made by former great powers in similar power transition processes. President Xi reassured President Obama of China’s commitment to this cause.

Finally, President Xi put forward a “Three-Point Proposal” as a new formula for the U.S.-China relationship in particular and other great powers in general:

1. No clash (不冲突) or confrontation (不对抗). This means that the two nations will objectively and reasonably look at each other’s strategic intent, insist on becoming partners not opponents, and handle conflicts and differences through dialogue and nonconfrontational means.

2. Mutual respect (互相尊重). The countries will respect the choice the other side has made on its sociopolitical system and path of development, mutually respect each other’s core interests and major national concerns, seek harmony and bury hatchets, be forgiving, learn from each other, and make progress together.

3. Seeking cooperation and win-win (合作共赢). The two sides should abandon a zero-sum mindset, be considerate of the other’s interests, promote common development while pursuing its own, and deepen integration of interests.

Additionally, the Chinese leader asked his U.S. counterparts to abandon the Cold War mindset and give this formula a chance for success.

The three points, however, hardly present anything new. They are reiterations of China’s long-held “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” which emphasize mutual respect for a nation-state’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, noninterference in a sovereign state’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. China has used these principles to protect its core interests since the mid-1950s (although China did not use the term “core interest” until recent years).

The Devil is in the Details.

The most troubling details concerning the call for the United States to respect China’s core interests are stated in China’s government White Paper, and they include: 1) national sovereignty; 2) national security; 3) territorial integrity; 4) national unity; 5) the political system as stipulated in China’s constitution; 6) overall social stability; and, 7) the basic safeguard for sustainable

economic and social development.

The Chinese have made it clear that respecting China's core interests is the starting and most critical point, without which, talks about reducing the "trust deficit," hopes for genuine cooperation, and even the new formula for peace between the United States and China will be impossible. To the United States, however, this Chinese position puts the cart before the horse—it is difficult for the United States to comply.

Take item 5 for example. The United States has a self-proclaimed mission to promote democratic government everywhere. But this interest clashes with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s authoritarian rule. To the Chinese leaders, U.S. efforts to promote democracy in China and criticisms of China's human rights violations and universal values are attempts to subvert the Chinese government, hence an intrusion on China's core interests. This conflict has had the United States and China at odds since the founding of the People's Republic of China over 60 years ago, and no end is in sight, for the United States has no intention to give up its mission any time soon, and the CCP is determined to maintain its authoritarian rule in China for as long as it can.

But even if disputes over ideologies can be set aside, China and the United States have much to wrestle with concerning China's core interests on territorial integrity and national unity. Chinese President Xi made it categorically clear when he was about to assume the Chinese presidency (early 2013) that although China is committed to peaceful development, it will not compromise its core interests. Chinese Defense Minister Chang reminded his audience during his visit to the Pentagon that "no one should fantasize that China would barter away its core interests; nor should anyone underestimate China's will and determination in defending its territory, sovereignty, and national unity." However, the United States does not see eye to eye with China on its elusive core interests of territorial integrity and national unity. The United States has never endorsed China's claims on the "inherent, inseparable, and indisputable territories" in the East and South China Seas, not even China's avowed unification with Taiwan. To complicate matters, the United States has its fingerprints all over China's territorial disputes and is entangled in some of them because of its alliances with Japan and the Philippines. At this point, there is no indication that the United States can extricate itself from these entanglements. It is therefore very difficult for the United States to give the respect the Chinese have requested.

A Few Doses of Caution.

Caution is certainly in order. Chinese leaders should see that given the deep-seated distrust between the United States and China and the controversial nature of China's core interests, the United States cannot accept China's proposal in good faith. Americans cannot be sure whether

China's calls for peace are genuine or if they are the tactics of *tao-guang yang-hui*, a strategy China has pursued since the late-1980s; it is from an ancient Chinese story of hiding intentions and biding time for revenge. (The Chinese do not like other people equating *tao-guang yang-hui* with this story, but they cannot deny that is what *tao-guang yang-hui* is all about; if they do not like the comparison, then they should not have used it in the first place, which is why others may be suspicious of their intentions.)

Another reason for caution over China's new formula for great power relations is that Chinese leaders should see that their new formula is nothing more than a goodwill call (Chinese celebrating it as a new theory notwithstanding); and there is no guarantee that it can be translated into action. Indeed, China's so-call Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence have no binding power, and they are based solely on goodwill and self-restraint. In a world where nation-states' actions are dictated by their self interests, it is doubtful that these principles can become guiding principles for great power relations.

Finally, Chinese leaders should not get carried away with China's development. Unqualified celebration of the new formula does no good for China. Overconfidence in China's development model and its political system is foolish. Chinese leaders should know that although they promise to honor China's peaceful development commitment, they can still go off track with China's newfound power. Indeed, as the old saying goes, one's intention is proportional to one's capability. There is no reason why the Chinese are immune to that rule. Many of China's promises were made when China was weak. Consequently, there is no guarantee that China will not change when it is strong. This is part of the perils of a great power transition. China should guard against the temptations of prematurely challenging the United States.

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